



Creativity creates enthusiasm in Cooperstown

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The Prairie Garden blooms each year on the Courthouse lawn.

Cooperstown is a community that puts out a spark on holidays, gets kids excited about art education and attracts artists from around the world. All this activity has laid the groundwork for a possible large project called the Dakota Contemporary Arts Center, which is gaining support from much of North Dakota's growing artist network.

Arts Council has history of Creativity

The Griggs County Council on the Arts has been livening up Cooperstown's community life since 1980. It began with an event called "Ye Olde Madrigal Christmas Feaste," which included kings, queens, beggars, a dragon and the rest of the royal court.

Since then, a large Christmas concert with food and music has been held annually, and many other events have delighted the community. For Valentine's Day during the town's 1989 centennial, the council brought in the Minot Orchestra, a violinist from Italy and a large audience of 500. In August, the council kicked off its most recent membership drive with a bluegrass group called Cottonwood, and a performance by the Jamestown Choir in October.

Local gallery and projects

Now in its 25th year, the council continues organizing and sponsoring all kinds of endeavors, many outside of music. Its library, which contains information about 20 artists, rotates every three years.

One of its most successful events has been with the Missoula Children's Theatre group from Montana.

Council member Grechen Kottke ran a local gallery, called the "GK Gallery," for seven years. Its mission was to provide art education and exhibit regional artists. It held 87 exhibitions, showing the work of more than 200 artists between its opening in 1996 and closing in 2003. Some works are still hung in the local Post Office Café.

In 2000, the gallery commissioned three artists to create a prairie garden, commemorating those who first settled the area. They are Kathryn Vigesaa-Lipke, born and raised in rural Griggs County, who came from Vermont; Ines Diederich from Germany, and Leona Ikonen from Finland. They spent two weeks in Cooperstown to create the indigenous garden.

More recently, in 2003, a Challenge America grant from the North Dakota Council on the Arts, made possible by the National Endowment for the Arts, made another permanent public art piece possible. Developed by artist Terry Jelsing of Fargo, it is called the "Prairie Stone Compass." A Midwest version of Stonehenge, the sculpture in the county fair grounds includes a variety of local history-telling items donated by community members. It includes old tools and equipment that represent occupations of those who first built the community, and its



The Community-high school Christmas choir had nearly 100 members last year.

points line up with the sun and moon as they travel across the sky.



Left: The Prairie Stone Compass sits as a public history art piece on the Griggs County fairground. Below: Old grade school buildings will sit empty until next spring, when renovation work to turn them into an arts center is scheduled to begin.



In the school

Griggs County schools have been the beneficiary of artist residencies, in which an artist spends a week in the school demonstrating a form of art and helping the kids to learn about it. Usually recommended by the North Dakota Council of the Arts, each residency can cost up to \$6,000, but grants and local sponsorship help. The most recent residency was an Australian who taught artwork of the native Aboriginal people.

Another school-based facet of the arts in Cooperstown is the Picture Person Program, which was first done in Grand Forks. In the program, volunteers teach about an artist, and then have the kids do projects in that artist's style. JoAnne Wold, who volunteers with the program, says one fun artist to learn about was Charlie Russell of Montana. Russell used to surprise people while visiting by creating clay figurines like little bears in his pockets without looking. As a corresponding assignment, the kids got to try the same.

"Like most elementary schools in North Dakota, we don't have an art teacher, but the kids love when the picture person comes," said Wold.

For the 2003-04 school year, the Griggs County Central School District was surprised to receive the Creative Ticket Schools of Excellence Award. It was given by the North Dakota Arts Alliance, in recognition of the school district's continued partnership with the Griggs County Council on the Arts.

"Not all kids are athletes, and often those are the activities stressed. Everyone has stronger areas of talent beyond athletics and the arts are better for some kids, helping them be more creative and develop self-confidence," explained Beth Stokka, speech coach at the high school.

Dakota Contemporary Arts Center plans

A recent addition to the town's high school put all grades under one roof, leaving the old elementary school vacant. Four young, talented artists plan to move to Cooperstown and turn the empty buildings into the "Dakota Contemporary Arts Center."

Kari Holoien and Jacob Sharff are returning from Oregon for the project. Holoien, a photographer originally from Fargo, heard

about the vacant school building from her mother. Sharff, a Christine native, has worked at the Walker Minneapolis Institute of Art and is finishing a degree at Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon.

Michael Dagen of Possess, Minnesota, and his wife, Amber Fletchcock of Devils Lake, have been in Fargo about 10 years. Dagen's artistic talents cover all kinds of music performance and recording, while Fletchcock's focus is on contemporary oil painting. All four artists have been involved in various film, music and art festivals, but were ready for a change.

"It was either New York or Cooperstown," said both Holoien and Dagen.

Part of the new arts center project will be networking more North Dakota artists together. Another part is bringing in out-of-state artists for

residencies, aimed to begin in 2006. Rather than spending only a week within the schools, artists will be able to apply for up to two-month stays, each ending with a showcase open to the community. Student studios and workshops will also be developed.

"North Dakotans often sell our state short. There's a real mystic curiosity to North Dakota, and other artists are curious about what's here," said Holoien.

Cooperstown's Artist in Residency and Prairie Compass projects and GK Gallery have received support from the North Dakota Council on the Arts. For more information about the North Dakota Council on the Arts and its programs that support communities across the state, call 701-328-7590, or visit its website at www.discovernd.com/arts.



Fiddlin' Johnny and family have been one of the entertainment acts at the art council's yearly membership drive kickoff.